When War Disperses and Peace Mobilizes: Ukraine's Weapons Reservoir and the Postwar Proliferation Risk

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July 28, 2026

Abstract

The principal arms-control danger created by the war in Ukraine may emerge not during peak combat but during the transition from war to peace. Current evidence does not demonstrate a large and systematic flow of Western-supplied weapons from Ukraine into European criminal markets. It does, however, indicate substantial domestic proliferation involving military firearms, grenades, mines, ammunition, explosive components, battlefield recoveries, captured weapons, and unauthorized personal holdings. Active warfare both creates and restrains this reservoir. Weapons become widely distributed, yet military demand, command structures, checkpoints, restricted mobility, and operational necessity inhibit their commercial circulation. A ceasefire may reverse these conditions. Demobilization, unit dissolution, population movement, economic disruption, depot consolidation, and declining military demand can transform immobile wartime holdings into tradable postwar commodities. This paper develops a phase-transition account of conflict-legacy weapons proliferation. It distinguishes present trafficking from latent mobilization capacity, examines how criminal networks may absorb dispersed arms, and argues that registration, tracing, collection, and surplus-management systems must be established before hostilities end. The central claim is that war disperses weapons, but peace may mobilize them.

Keywords: Ukraine, weapons proliferation, illicit firearms trafficking, postwar security, small arms and light weapons, arms tracing, organized crime, demobilization, conflict legacy, European security.

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1. Introduction

Public discussion of weapons diversion from Ukraine is frequently distorted by two opposing errors. The first is premature alarmism: the assertion that enormous quantities of Western weapons are already moving systematically from Ukraine into criminal and terrorist markets. The second is premature reassurance: the inference that limited present evidence of international trafficking implies limited future danger. Neither conclusion adequately describes the present evidence or the structure of the long-term risk.

Recent investigations indicate that military weapons and explosive materials have proliferated substantially within Ukraine. At the same time, available evidence does not show a large, organized, and continuous outward flow into European black markets. Most documented seizures appear to involve older Soviet, Russian, or Ukrainian weapons rather than newly supplied Western systems. Western weapons have appeared in some cases, but they do not dominate the known illicit inventory. This distinction is important because it separates verified trafficking from speculation while preserving the seriousness of the underlying problem.

The present situation should not be treated as a stable equilibrium. Wartime conditions suppress many of the mechanisms that ordinarily allow illicit markets to grow. Weapons remain valuable at the front. Military units continue to require them. Travel is restricted, borders are closely watched, and unauthorized sales expose participants to military discipline, prosecution, or retaliation. These constraints may keep international trafficking relatively limited even while weapons become increasingly dispersed inside the country.

A ceasefire or political settlement could alter nearly every one of these conditions. Military formations may shrink or disappear. Temporary depots may be closed. Soldiers and volunteers may return home carrying weapons, ammunition, or knowledge of hidden caches. Civilian movement may increase rapidly. Economic hardship may deepen in communities dependent on wartime employment. Criminal groups may gain easier access to potential sellers, intermediaries, and transportation routes. Weapons that were previously instruments of survival may become sources of income, insurance, status, or political leverage.

The central analytical question is therefore not simply whether weapons are leaving Ukraine now. It is whether weapons that are currently scattered, concealed, retained, abandoned, captured, or imperfectly documented could become mobile after the institutional structure of war contracts. Present trafficking is an observable flow. Postwar proliferation is a latent capacity. Confusing these two conditions produces misleading assessments in both directions.

The absence of a large current flow does not prove that the underlying reservoir is small. It may instead mean that the reservoir has not yet become commercially mobile. A lake can remain full

while its outlet is narrow. The relevant danger begins when the outlet widens faster than the capacity to identify, collect, or trace what passes through it.

2. The Temporal Error in Conventional Risk Assessment

Conventional arms-diversion assessments often focus on the number of weapons currently intercepted outside the conflict zone. This approach is understandable because seizures provide tangible evidence. A rifle recovered in France, a grenade intercepted in Poland, or a launcher discovered in Italy can be photographed, traced, and entered into a criminal investigation. Weapons still hidden in homes, vehicles, abandoned positions, informal depots, or former unit stocks are much harder to count.

This evidentiary imbalance encourages authorities to confuse what is visible with what is important. International seizures measure only weapons that have already entered a trafficking pathway and have subsequently been detected. They do not measure weapons that remain concealed, weapons retained for future sale, weapons whose owners are waiting for prices to rise, or weapons whose documentation has already become uncertain. A low number of external seizures may therefore coexist with a much larger population of internally dispersed arms.

The timing of assessment is equally important. A weapons reservoir created during war may behave differently after war. During active combat, a rifle, launcher, drone munition, or case of ammunition has immediate operational value. Its possessor may need it for personal survival, unit defense, or territorial control. The same object may have a different meaning after demobilization. It may become unnecessary for combat but valuable as a commodity, bargaining instrument, protective asset, or source of emergency income.

Postwar proliferation is therefore not merely continued wartime diversion at a lower intensity. It is a distinct social and economic process. It begins when weapons cease to be embedded primarily in military relationships and become embedded in private, commercial, criminal, or political relationships. This transition can occur even when battlefield violence is declining.

The most dangerous period may consequently begin when public attention is moving elsewhere. During war, foreign governments, intelligence services, military commands, journalists, and aid organizations closely monitor weapons transfers. After a settlement, attention shifts toward reconstruction, elections, refugees, infrastructure, economic recovery, and political normalization. Arms control may become less visible precisely when dispersed weapons are becoming easier to move.

This temporal mismatch creates a policy trap. Governments may postpone expensive collection and tracing programs until after the war because wartime implementation appears difficult. Yet after the war, the information needed for effective recovery may have deteriorated. Commanders may have relocated, soldiers may have dispersed, temporary records may have disappeared, and weapons may have passed through several undocumented hands. A collection program begun late must search for unknown objects among a mobile population. A program begun early can establish a record of known objects before they disappear.

The decisive distinction is between reconstructing history and preserving history. Postwar investigators can attempt to reconstruct where a seized weapon came from, who possessed it, and when it left official control. Wartime documentation can preserve that history before it is lost. The former is forensic recovery. The latter is preventive governance.

3. War as a Reservoir-Creation Process

Modern industrial warfare distributes weapons far beyond permanent arsenals. Arms move from national depots to regional stores, front-line units, territorial-defense formations, training centers, repair facilities, temporary staging areas, captured-equipment points, and emergency civilian-defense networks. Each transfer creates an opportunity for documentation failure, accidental loss, battlefield abandonment, unauthorized retention, mistaken destruction reports, or substitution between weapons.

The Ukrainian case is especially complex because the conflict contains several overlapping inventories. There are weapons officially held by Ukrainian military and police organizations, arms distributed during emergency mobilization, Russian weapons captured or abandoned, Soviet-era legacy stocks, civilian-owned firearms, foreign-supplied equipment, privately assembled drone systems, unexploded munitions, and matériel recovered from former battlefields. These categories do not remain cleanly separated under combat conditions.

Captured weapons present a particularly difficult problem. A weapon taken from an opposing force may be treated as military property, evidence, a battlefield trophy, or a personal possession. Formal policy may require surrender or registration, while local practice may tolerate informal retention. Such ambiguity is manageable only while the possessor remains attached to a known unit and location. After demobilization, an ambiguously held weapon can become almost indistinguishable from an illicit weapon.

Battlefield abandonment creates another layer of uncertainty. Destroyed vehicles, evacuated positions, collapsed defensive lines, unexploded ammunition, and damaged depots may leave weapons scattered across territory that changes hands repeatedly. Some matériel is recovered by military units. Some is taken by civilians. Some is buried, hidden, stripped for components, or

retained for later use. Even where serial numbers remain intact, the chain of custody may be irretrievable.

The resulting reservoir is not composed solely of high-profile foreign weapons. It is likely to be dominated numerically by older firearms, ammunition, grenades, mines, explosives, detonators, and Russian or Soviet-designed systems. These ordinary items may produce the largest cumulative postwar burden because they are familiar, durable, portable, and useful to many kinds of criminal actors.

Public attention nevertheless tends to concentrate on the most advanced systems. Portable air-defense missiles, guided anti-tank weapons, sophisticated optics, and military drones attract concern because their diversion could have strategic consequences. That concern is justified, but it can obscure the slower transformation produced by common weapons. A single advanced missile may trigger an international security crisis. Thousands of rifles, grenades, and explosive components may gradually alter patterns of organized crime, political intimidation, assassination, extortion, and urban violence.

The problem must therefore be understood at two scales. Rare advanced systems create low-probability but potentially catastrophic risks. Common military weapons create higher-probability, cumulative risks that can persist for decades. Effective policy must address both without assuming that one is a substitute for the other.

4. The Peace-Mobilization Hypothesis

The end of intense combat does not eliminate the weapons problem. It changes the forces governing it. War creates scarcity, urgency, discipline, and immediate military demand. Peace reduces some of these pressures while increasing mobility, commercial access, and opportunities for concealment.

During active warfare, a weapon may be worth more to its holder as protection than as merchandise. Selling it may weaken the holder’s unit, expose the seller to punishment, or leave the seller defenseless. Roads may be controlled, borders monitored, and communication with foreign buyers difficult. Criminal organizations may possess trafficking routes, but they must operate within an environment dominated by military institutions.

After a ceasefire, the balance can shift. A former combatant may no longer need several weapons. A unit armorer may know which records are incomplete. A depot employee may face unpaid wages. A civilian may possess a rifle distributed during an emergency but have no clear legal mechanism for returning it. A family may retain a weapon as insurance against renewed

war. A local political group may preserve arms in anticipation of future instability. Criminal brokers can exploit each of these circumstances differently.

The transformation is not automatic. Many combatants will surrender weapons voluntarily. Many institutions will preserve discipline. Many communities will reject criminal trafficking. The danger arises because only a small proportion of a very large reservoir must become available to sustain an illicit market.

The critical transition occurs when a weapon changes social meaning. During war, it is an instrument of defense or combat. Immediately after war, it may become a symbol of sacrifice, distrust, status, or unfinished political obligation. Later, it may become a tradable asset. Collection policies that treat every retained weapon as merely stolen property may fail to recognize this sequence.

The phrase “peace mobilizes weapons” does not mean that peace itself causes criminality. It means that the normalization of movement, trade, and civilian life can unintentionally provide weapons with access to markets that wartime conditions had constrained. The same reopened roads that carry reconstruction materials can carry contraband. The same expanding logistics networks that support economic recovery can be used by traffickers. The same demobilization that reduces organized military violence can disperse individuals with weapons knowledge and criminal contacts.

The postwar risk is therefore nonlinear. It may remain low for a period and then rise rapidly when several conditions align: declining military control, expanding mobility, growing economic distress, increasing criminal demand, and insufficient collection capacity. Once regular buyers, sellers, prices, routes, and intermediaries become established, opportunistic diversion can become a durable market.

This leads to the paper’s central proposition: war creates the reservoir, but the order of postwar events determines whether that reservoir contracts or becomes mobile. If registration, surrender, tracing, and depot security expand before demobilization and unrestricted movement, the reservoir can be reduced. If mobility and criminal access expand first, illicit markets may form faster than authorities can dismantle them.

5. Criminal Absorption of the Postwar Reservoir

A dispersed weapons reservoir does not become an international black market merely because weapons exist. It requires organizations capable of locating sellers, evaluating matériel, arranging payment, concealing transportation, crossing borders, and reaching buyers. Europe already contains such organizations. The principal danger is therefore not the creation of an

entirely new trafficking system, but the absorption of Ukrainian conflict weapons into criminal systems that already move drugs, people, stolen vehicles, counterfeit documents, and other contraband.

Firearms trafficking is well suited to this form of criminal diversification. Weapons are durable, compact relative to their value, and capable of being stored for long periods. A shipment does not need to be large to be profitable or operationally important. Unlike narcotics, firearms are not consumed after a single transaction. The same weapon can be used repeatedly, resold, rented, transferred among criminal groups, or retained as a reserve asset. A modest number of diverted weapons can therefore exert effects over many years.

The European illicit-arms market is also selective. Criminal groups do not necessarily seek every weapon that becomes available. They seek particular combinations of reliability, concealability, firepower, ammunition availability, prestige, and price. Handguns may be preferred for ordinary criminal use, while assault rifles, grenades, and explosives may be reserved for intimidation, attacks on rivals, armored-vehicle robberies, prison escapes, or political violence. Specialized systems may interest terrorist organizations, mercenary networks, or actors seeking to attack critical infrastructure.

This demand structure means that the most dangerous diversion may not resemble wholesale looting. A broker may assemble small consignments from several sources, move them through ordinary vehicles, and conceal them among legitimate goods. Individual travelers may transport components or ammunition in repeated journeys. Weapons may pass through several intermediaries before crossing the Ukrainian border. By the time they are seized in Western Europe, the original seller may be separated from the final buyer by multiple transactions and jurisdictions.

The Western Balkans provide a relevant historical warning. Weapons remaining from the Yugoslav conflicts continue to enter European criminal markets decades after the wars ended. Europol operations have repeatedly identified trafficking routes connecting Balkan source countries with buyers in France, Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain, and other European states. In one 2025 operation, investigators dismantled a route believed to have moved assault rifles and grenades from Bosnia and Herzegovina through Slovenia and Austria toward France. In 2026, Europol reported another network exchanging firearms from the Western Balkans and Türkiye for cannabis within the European Union. These cases demonstrate how conflict-era stockpiles can be integrated into multi-commodity criminal trade long after the original political conflict has receded.

The comparison should not be treated as a prediction that Ukraine will simply reproduce the Balkan experience. Ukraine differs in territory, military scale, institutional capacity, international

support, border geography, and the technological character of the conflict. Nevertheless, the Balkans establish an important principle: weapons left outside effective state control can remain economically and operationally useful for generations.

Criminal absorption may initially appear as isolated opportunism. One soldier sells a rifle. One civilian discovers grenades. One depot employee removes ammunition. One transport operator carries a package across a border. These incidents may seem too small to constitute a strategic problem. Yet repeated transactions generate knowledge. Buyers learn which sellers are reliable. Brokers learn which checkpoints are vulnerable. Transporters learn how weapons are concealed. Corrupt officials learn the price of cooperation. What begins as episodic leakage can thereby acquire organization.

The decisive threshold is not a particular number of trafficked weapons. It is the formation of a reproducible relationship between supply and demand. Once illicit actors know where weapons can be obtained, how they can be moved, and who will purchase them, the market no longer depends on accidental discovery. It becomes self-maintaining.

This explains why early prevention has disproportionate value. Authorities are not merely attempting to seize objects. They are attempting to prevent the formation of durable social networks around those objects. It is far easier to recover a concealed rifle before a broker has connected its holder to a foreign buyer than to dismantle an established route that has already developed trusted personnel, financing, concealment methods, and corrupt protection.

6. The Likely Composition of Postwar Leakage

The public imagination tends to focus on advanced Western weapons because they are politically sensitive and militarily powerful. Yet the most probable postwar leakage would consist largely of ordinary military matériel: rifles, pistols, machine guns, grenades, ammunition, mines, explosives, detonators, anti-armor launchers, and weapon components.

These items possess several characteristics favorable to illicit circulation. They are widely distributed, familiar to combatants, relatively easy to conceal, and useful to criminal groups without extensive technical support. Many can remain functional for decades if stored adequately. Ammunition and explosives may deteriorate, but they can still retain destructive capacity long after becoming unsafe to handle.

The 2025 *Weapons Compass* report described substantial wartime proliferation within Ukraine and found that identifiable seized weapons were predominantly Soviet, Russian, or Ukrainian legacy types rather than newly supplied Western systems. It also documented marked increases in seizures involving grenades, launchers, mines, and ammunition after the full-scale invasion.

This evidence suggests that the numerical center of the problem lies in mixed legacy and battlefield inventories, not solely in externally supplied high-technology systems.

Grenades may be particularly consequential. They are small, easily hidden, and immediately useful for intimidation or attack. European criminal cases have repeatedly involved military grenades sourced from conflict-legacy stocks. Their portability permits trafficking through personal luggage, private vehicles, postal channels, or small commercial shipments. Unlike a conspicuous missile system, a handful of grenades can pass through several countries without requiring specialized transport.

Military explosives and detonators create a related danger. Explosive material can be separated from its original munition and adapted to other purposes. A mine or artillery component need not be used according to its military design to become useful to criminals. It can be dismantled, repackaged, combined with commercial electronics, or incorporated into an improvised device. The proliferation problem therefore includes not only complete weapons but also recoverable energetic materials and components.

Assault rifles and machine guns present a different pattern. They are harder to conceal than handguns but carry symbolic and coercive power. Their presence can transform criminal confrontations, strengthen groups engaged in territorial control, and raise the lethality of attacks on police or rivals. They may be stored for exceptional operations rather than carried routinely.

Disposable anti-armor weapons occupy an intermediate category. They are larger and more conspicuous, but some require relatively little training and can threaten armored vehicles, fortified buildings, police facilities, or infrastructure. Even when their original ammunition has expired or their military utility has declined, their psychological and political significance may remain high.

The probability of diversion decreases as systems become more specialized, but the potential consequence increases. Portable air-defense missiles, advanced guided weapons, military-grade sensors, and sophisticated drone munitions require greater technical competence, maintenance, and logistical support. They are also more likely to have distinctive markings, controlled components, or intelligence interest. Large-scale leakage of such systems is therefore less likely than leakage of rifles or grenades.

Nevertheless, arms-control planning cannot dismiss rare-system risk. A single portable missile reaching a capable terrorist organization could affect civil aviation security across an entire region. A guided anti-armor system used against a political convoy could have consequences far beyond the number of weapons involved. A specialized optical or electronic component could

be incorporated into another weapons platform. The relevant danger is not statistical prevalence but strategic effect.

Policy must therefore avoid two symmetrical mistakes. It must not exaggerate isolated evidence into claims of mass diversion. It must also not use the absence of mass diversion to ignore low-volume, high-consequence pathways. Common weapons and advanced systems require different detection strategies, but both belong within the same postwar control architecture.

7. Tracing as the Preservation of Institutional Memory

Tracing is often imagined as a process that begins after police recover a weapon. Investigators examine markings, identify the manufacturer, determine the country of import, and reconstruct the chain of lawful custody until they locate the point of diversion. This retrospective process is necessary, but its success depends on records created long before the weapon is seized.

A weapon does not carry its administrative history within its physical structure. A serial number may identify a production sequence, but it does not independently reveal every unit, depot, individual, or transport through which the weapon passed. That information exists only if institutions recorded it and preserved the records.

Wartime conditions create obvious obstacles. Weapons may be issued rapidly, transferred between units, repaired with substituted components, captured, recovered, or destroyed under extreme pressure. Paper records may be lost when positions are overrun. Digital systems may not communicate with one another. Serial numbers may be recorded incorrectly. A weapon officially listed as destroyed may later be recovered intact, while one recorded as missing may actually have been destroyed beyond identification.

These imperfections do not make tracing futile. They make early documentation more important. A partial wartime record is usually more useful than an attempted reconstruction years later. Photographs, serial numbers, unit assignments, transfer dates, recovery locations, and loss reports can establish a baseline against which later discoveries are compared.

INTERPOL's illicit Arms Records and Tracing Management System allows law-enforcement agencies to record firearms reported as lost, stolen, trafficked, or smuggled and to submit international trace requests. The system contains more than 1.5 million records and is intended to connect weapons recovered in one jurisdiction with records held elsewhere. Its effectiveness, however, depends on states entering accurate information and responding to requests. A database cannot trace a weapon that was never recorded, or reconstruct a chain of custody that institutions allowed to disappear.

The most valuable records are therefore those created while people still remember the circumstances of transfer. Unit commanders know whether a weapon was captured, issued, damaged, or lost. Depot personnel know whether a discrepancy resulted from administrative delay or physical disappearance. Soldiers know where matériel was abandoned during retreat. Civilians know where emergency distributions occurred. Over time, these memories fragment.

Tracing should consequently be understood as the preservation of institutional memory. Its purpose is not merely to solve future crimes. It creates accountability while accountability is still possible.

This requires compatibility between military logistics, police records, customs systems, and international tracing platforms. A weapon may leave military custody and later appear in a criminal case. If military databases cannot communicate with police investigators, the record effectively ends at the institutional boundary. The same problem arises when national records cannot be searched through international mechanisms.

The information collected must extend beyond complete firearms. Ammunition lot numbers, explosive markings, component identifiers, photographs of captured weapons, and records of destruction can all support later analysis. Even where a precise trace is impossible, aggregated data can reveal patterns. Repeated recoveries from the same production lot, unit, depot, or geographical area may identify a leakage point that no single seizure would expose.

Preserving information also protects against political manipulation. Weapons diversion is likely to become a subject of propaganda, accusation, and strategic disinformation. Reliable records allow governments and investigators to distinguish documented loss from rumor, battlefield capture from criminal sale, and isolated diversion from systematic trafficking. Transparency therefore serves both security and credibility.

8. Collection Before Demobilization

The phrase “collection before the war ends” does not imply removing weapons from forces that still require them. It means establishing the legal, administrative, logistical, and social mechanisms that can operate as military necessity declines.

Collection cannot begin with a single postwar deadline announced from the capital. It must be prepared through institutions that combatants and civilians recognize as legitimate. People need to know which weapons must be returned, where they can be surrendered, what documentation will be required, whether possession will trigger prosecution, and what happens to the surrendered matériel.

Ambiguity encourages concealment. A civilian who received a rifle during an emergency may not know whether returning it will expose failures in the original distribution records. A soldier holding a captured weapon may fear punishment. A family that discovers ammunition among a deceased relative's belongings may fear criminal liability. Where the legal consequences are uncertain, hiding, abandoning, or selling the weapon may appear safer than surrendering it.

A credible recovery program must distinguish among passive possession, negligent retention, theft, trafficking, and violent misuse. Treating all categories identically can drive ordinary possessors toward criminal intermediaries. At the same time, an overly broad amnesty can protect traffickers or erase evidence. The design must therefore combine a limited opportunity for voluntary compliance with progressively stronger enforcement against continued concealment and sale.

Convenience is also essential. Surrender points must be geographically accessible, procedures understandable, and handling practices safe. People should not be expected to carry unstable explosives into ordinary police stations. Mobile collection teams, specialized explosive-ordnance personnel, local administrative centers, and confidential reporting channels may all be necessary.

Ukraine's arms-control planning has increasingly recognized the importance of local institutions, public risk education, veteran engagement, law-enforcement coordination, and preparation for emerging threats such as uncrewed systems. Small Arms Survey projects in Ukraine have emphasized local risk assessment, specialized training, community awareness, and the need to include veterans in future control efforts.

Veterans are central because collection is not merely a technical inventory exercise. A retained weapon may symbolize survival, sacrifice, distrust of a settlement, fear of renewed invasion, or membership in a wartime community. Demanding surrender without addressing these meanings can be interpreted as abandonment or humiliation.

Successful recovery must therefore be integrated with veteran policy. Reliable benefits, medical care, employment, housing, documentation of service, and confidence in future security all affect willingness to surrender weapons. An individual who trusts the state and expects social reintegration has fewer reasons to retain an undeclared arsenal. An individual who expects instability, poverty, political betrayal, or renewed war may regard disarmament as irrational.

The same principle applies to communities. Regions exposed to occupation, bombardment, or repeated changes of control may distrust guarantees issued by distant institutions. Collection campaigns must acknowledge that fear rather than dismiss it as criminal intent. Public legitimacy does not weaken enforcement. It reduces the number of people who must be compelled.

Collection also requires secure destinations. Weapons surrendered into poorly guarded depots can be stolen again. Ammunition consolidated without proper storage may create catastrophic explosion risks. Surplus systems must be audited, safely transported, rendered unusable, assigned to legitimate reserves, or destroyed under verifiable procedures.

The timing of these arrangements is decisive. Legal frameworks, databases, trained personnel, surrender procedures, storage sites, and international cooperation cannot be improvised after millions of people begin moving and military formations start dissolving. By then, the reservoir may already be fragmenting into private possession.

The objective is not complete recovery, which is unlikely after a conflict of this scale. It is to reduce the reservoir before criminal markets can organize around it. Every weapon registered before demobilization is easier to identify later. Every safe surrender made before illicit prices rise is one less potential commodity. Every depot audited before units dissolve preserves a chain of responsibility.

Postwar arms control succeeds when recovery develops faster than mobility. It fails when society reopens before its wartime weapons have been made visible.

9. Borders as Filters, Not Solutions

Border enforcement will be necessary, but it cannot serve as the primary answer to Ukraine's postwar weapons problem. By the time an illicit weapon reaches a border, several earlier controls have already failed. The weapon has left legitimate custody, escaped registration or recovery, reached an intermediary, and entered a transportation network. Border interception addresses the final stage of diversion rather than its origin.

The physical geography of postwar recovery will make comprehensive inspection impossible. Ukraine's trade, reconstruction, and economic revival will require enormous movements of people, vehicles, machinery, scrap metal, agricultural products, building materials, and humanitarian supplies. Returning refugees, veterans, contractors, aid personnel, and commercial operators will cross borders in both directions. A security regime restrictive enough to inspect every movement thoroughly would obstruct the recovery it is intended to protect.

Traffickers do not require open and undefended borders. They need only to identify small discrepancies between the volume of movement and the capacity for inspection. Weapons can be concealed in private vehicles, commercial freight, construction equipment, agricultural machinery, or mixed consignments. Components can be separated and transported through different routes. Repeated small transfers may avoid the attention that a single large shipment would attract.

The European experience shows that firearms traffickers commonly use routes and relationships developed for other forms of organized crime. Europol identifies existing criminal channels, especially those linked to the Western Balkans and the former Soviet region, as important mechanisms for moving illicit firearms into the European Union. These networks do not specialize exclusively in guns. They adapt transportation, corruption, financing, and concealment systems already used for drugs, stolen vehicles, migrant smuggling, and other contraband.

A Ukrainian conflict weapon might therefore move through several pathways. It could cross directly into an adjacent European Union state. It could first move through Moldova or another non-EU jurisdiction. It could travel south toward Black Sea and Balkan routes. It could be concealed within legitimate reconstruction trade. It could also remain inside Ukraine until a foreign broker arranges a specific purchase. There is unlikely to be one dominant corridor that can be closed by concentrating resources at a few checkpoints.

Border control should consequently be intelligence-led rather than based solely on indiscriminate inspection. Customs officers need access to weapon identifiers, loss reports, trafficking profiles, suspicious-shipment indicators, and information from criminal investigations. Police, border guards, customs authorities, military logistics personnel, forensic laboratories, and foreign partners must be able to exchange data rapidly. A border officer who finds a weapon but cannot determine its history has interrupted a shipment without necessarily identifying the network behind it.

Ukraine and its European partners have already begun developing parts of this architecture. The European Union Advisory Mission has supported work on integrated border management, the Unified Firearms Register, interagency coordination, forensic examination, firearms deactivation, and control over cross-border weapons movement. In 2026, the mission identified cooperation among law enforcement, prosecutors, courts, customs, border authorities, and forensic institutions as essential to an effective response during both wartime and postwar recovery.

The effectiveness of border enforcement will also depend on what happens after a seizure. A confiscated weapon should generate more than a possession charge. Investigators should determine where it originated, how it was acquired, whether it was part of a larger batch, who financed the transfer, and whether the transportation method has been used previously. Serial-number tracing, ballistic comparison, communications analysis, and financial investigation can convert an isolated seizure into knowledge about a supply network.

INTERPOL's international firearms systems can support this work by allowing authorities to compare recovered weapons against records of firearms reported lost, stolen, trafficked, or smuggled. Its ballistic network can also associate weapons or cartridge cases with crimes in

different jurisdictions. These tools are most valuable when national authorities enter data promptly and consistently. A weapon cannot be matched against a loss report that was never created.

Border policy should therefore be understood as one layer in a chain of controls. Registration makes weapons visible. Depot security prevents disappearance. collection removes weapons from circulation. Intelligence identifies emerging networks. Border operations interrupt movement. Tracing reveals origins. Prosecution raises the cost of participation. None of these functions can substitute for all the others.

A border can filter a flow, but it cannot drain a reservoir.

10. Reconstruction and the Political Economy of Diversion

Postwar reconstruction will create both the means to reduce proliferation and the conditions that may intensify it. Employment, functioning institutions, dependable public services, veteran reintegration, and economic recovery can reduce the incentives to retain or sell weapons. At the same time, the scale and speed of reconstruction may create opportunities for corruption, concealment, and criminal penetration.

Large reconstruction programs generate complex supply chains. Contractors, subcontractors, transport firms, scrap dealers, security companies, local officials, and foreign investors may operate across jurisdictions. Heavy machinery and commercial freight will move through areas where weapons and unexploded munitions remain scattered. Criminal organizations may infiltrate legitimate companies or create apparently lawful businesses that provide access to vehicles, warehouses, documentation, and border crossings.

The distinction between legitimate and illicit movement may therefore become difficult to maintain. A truck carrying building materials can also carry concealed ammunition. A company engaged in metal recovery can obtain access to former military sites. A security contractor can provide employment for veterans while also creating a concentration of weapons expertise and private force. A warehouse used for humanitarian supplies can be exploited by corrupt employees or outside brokers.

Corruption would magnify every other risk. A stolen weapon is dangerous, but a corrupt official who can repeatedly alter records, authorize shipments, or reveal inspection schedules creates a continuing source of diversion. The central threat is not merely individual theft. It is the formation of protected channels through which theft can recur.

This danger does not require corruption throughout the state. A small number of strategically placed participants may be sufficient. Depot personnel can create inventory discrepancies.

Customs officers can wave through selected vehicles. police officials can suppress investigations. Local administrators can provide false documents. Business owners can disguise transportation. Financial intermediaries can conceal payments. Each actor supplies only one part of the process, allowing the network to function without any participant controlling the entire operation.

Weapons trafficking may also become linked to barter rather than ordinary cash purchases. Europol has documented criminal networks exchanging firearms for cannabis and using multi-commodity relationships across several European countries. Such exchanges reduce dependence on formal financial channels and connect arms suppliers directly to organizations with established trafficking capacity.

A postwar Ukrainian market could develop similar exchanges. Weapons might be traded for drugs, stolen vehicles, forged documents, protection, transportation services, or access to foreign markets. In such systems, the monetary price of a weapon is less important than its role within a larger criminal relationship. A trafficker may accept weapons because they strengthen an allied organization, settle a debt, or secure access to another commodity.

Economic hardship would increase the pool of potential sellers. Former combatants, displaced families, depot employees, and civilians with hidden weapons may face unemployment, damaged property, medical expenses, or uncertain pensions. Most will not become traffickers. Nevertheless, criminal organizations need only a limited number of willing or vulnerable suppliers.

This makes social policy part of arms control. Veteran benefits, reliable salaries, housing support, disability services, employment opportunities, and legal assistance are not peripheral humanitarian measures. They affect the incentives surrounding weapon retention and sale. A person who sees a stable future within lawful institutions has less reason to treat a hidden weapon as savings, insurance, or bargaining power.

The reverse is also true. A recovery program that demands immediate surrender while benefits are delayed, institutions appear corrupt, and fears of renewed conflict remain unresolved may lack credibility. People may interpret the state as asking them to relinquish their last source of security while offering uncertain protection in return.

The recovery process must therefore establish a legitimate exchange, even when no direct payment is offered. The state asks the individual to surrender private force. In return, it must offer public security, legal clarity, social recognition, and confidence that renewed violence will not leave the individual defenseless. When that exchange is credible, collection becomes cooperation. When it is not, collection appears as unilateral disarmament.

Financial investigations should accompany physical weapons enforcement. Authorities should examine unexplained payments, criminal barter systems, transport-company ownership, depot-

related corruption, and the proceeds of trafficking. Seizing a shipment without identifying its financing may leave the organization intact. Following money, assets, communications, and business relationships can reveal the structure that made the shipment possible.

European policy is moving toward more consistent legal treatment of illicit firearms trafficking. In February 2026, the European Commission proposed an EU-wide criminal-law framework intended to provide common definitions of firearms offenses and stronger cooperation among national authorities. Greater legal consistency could reduce the ability of trafficking networks to exploit differences among jurisdictions.

Yet law alone will not determine the outcome. The political economy of reconstruction will decide whether weapons remain isolated private holdings, enter informal local markets, or become integrated into transnational trade. Postwar arms control must therefore be designed alongside reconstruction policy rather than added after economic systems are already operating.

Reconstruction will move concrete, steel, machinery, money, and people. Unless weapons control is embedded within that movement, reconstruction may also move the residue of war.

11. Beyond Physical Weapons: The Diffusion of Capability

The postwar proliferation problem extends beyond the transfer of complete firearms and munitions. The war has generated an enormous body of practical knowledge concerning drones, explosives, electronic warfare, targeting, surveillance, field repair, improvised manufacturing, and the adaptation of civilian technology to military purposes.

Knowledge does not pass through customs checkpoints in the same way as a rifle. It travels with people, videos, software, technical drawings, online communities, commercial products, and ordinary professional experience. A veteran drone operator can cross a border legally. A component can be purchased from a civilian supplier. Software can be copied instantly. A release mechanism can be reproduced in a workshop. The relevant capability may therefore spread even when no identifiable military weapon leaves Ukraine.

This distinction is especially important in relation to uncrewed systems. The war has accelerated the use of inexpensive commercial and semi-commercial drones for reconnaissance, targeting, communications relay, explosive delivery, and attacks on personnel or infrastructure. Many of the underlying components are dual-use. Airframes, batteries, motors, cameras, antennas, navigation systems, and control electronics have legitimate civilian applications.

Criminal groups do not need to reproduce the full sophistication of a military drone unit to acquire a new coercive capability. They may use drones to observe police activity, deliver

contraband, intimidate rivals, survey protected sites, interfere with infrastructure, or carry small explosive payloads. The technical threshold for limited criminal use is much lower than the threshold for effective battlefield operations.

Ukraine's arms-control community has already identified uncrewed systems as an emerging security issue requiring preparation. Small Arms Survey discussions with Ukrainian stakeholders have emphasized the need for specialized training, updated legislation, veteran engagement, and attention to new risks associated with uncrewed aerial systems.

The diffusion of expertise complicates conventional definitions of diversion. When a rifle is stolen, the object has clearly moved from legal to illegal possession. When a former technician applies lawful knowledge to an unlawful purpose, the transition occurs within conduct rather than ownership. When a commercial drone is modified after purchase, the weapon may not exist until the final stage of assembly.

This means that controlling physical inventories, though essential, will not contain every postwar threat. Authorities will also need forensic capacity for drones and electronics, regulation of certain high-risk components where proportionate, monitoring of criminal adaptation, protection of critical infrastructure, and channels through which veterans with specialized skills can enter lawful employment.

Veteran reintegration is particularly important here. Ukraine will emerge from the war with a large population possessing advanced practical experience in logistics, communications, medicine, engineering, cyber operations, drones, surveillance, and battlefield innovation. Properly integrated, this human capital could contribute substantially to reconstruction, civil protection, emergency response, technology, and European security. Excluded or economically marginalized, a small portion could become available to organized crime, mercenary activity, political violence, or illicit technical markets.

The objective should not be to treat veterans as presumptive threats. Such treatment would be unjust and counterproductive. It would stigmatize those whose cooperation is most necessary and could drive specialized communities away from public institutions. The better approach is to recognize expertise, provide lawful pathways for its continued use, and identify behavior indicating actual criminal recruitment.

The same principle applies to workshops and small manufacturers. Wartime production may involve decentralized facilities capable of assembling components, adapting commercial devices, repairing weapons, or manufacturing specialized parts. After the war, these facilities may convert to civilian production. Some may also retain equipment and knowledge capable of supporting illicit manufacturing.

Traditional arms trafficking assumes that weapons originate in factories or state arsenals and then enter criminal markets. Distributed manufacturing weakens this assumption. A criminal weapon may be assembled from lawful components purchased in several countries, fabricated parts, recovered explosive materials, and downloadable instructions. No single transaction necessarily reveals the final purpose.

The threat is therefore evolving from the diversion of objects toward the recombination of capabilities. Physical weapons remain central, but they are increasingly embedded in systems composed of hardware, software, communications, expertise, and supply chains.

This broader understanding also clarifies the global dimension. Ukrainian-origin rifles may or may not reach distant criminal markets in large numbers. Techniques developed and refined during the war will almost certainly be studied worldwide. Armed groups, cartels, terrorists, private security organizations, states, and ordinary militaries will absorb lessons concerning low-cost drones, battlefield improvisation, electronic countermeasures, and distributed production.

The diffusion cannot be completely prevented. Much of the underlying knowledge is public, commercially useful, or technically generic. The realistic objective is to reduce the conversion of lawful capability into criminal violence. That requires intelligence, regulation, industry cooperation, veteran inclusion, technical forensics, and resilient infrastructure.

The postwar legacy will therefore consist of more than weapons left in fields, homes, and depots. It will include a transformed understanding of how accessible technology can be weaponized.

The black market of the future may trade not only in arms, but in the ability to create effects once reserved for organized military forces.

12. Governing the Transition from War to Peace

The postwar weapons problem should not be treated as a single disarmament campaign beginning on the day a ceasefire is signed. It is better understood as a race between two processes. On one side, military institutions contract, civilians and veterans become more mobile, economic exchange resumes, and criminal brokers gain easier access to dispersed weapons. On the other side, governments attempt to register, recover, trace, secure, deactivate, or destroy those same weapons. The outcome will depend largely on which process develops faster.

A successful strategy must therefore precede the political settlement it is intended to support. Laws, databases, surrender procedures, trained collection teams, secure storage facilities, forensic laboratories, border protocols, and international tracing agreements cannot be created

instantly. Waiting until demobilization begins would mean constructing the recovery system while the population and the weapons reservoir are already dispersing.

The first requirement is a credible baseline. Ukraine cannot know with absolute precision how many weapons exist or where every weapon is located. No state engaged in a war of this intensity could achieve perfect accounting. The more realistic objective is to preserve as much identifying and custodial information as possible while military units, commanders, logisticians, and records remain accessible. The *Weapons Compass* report emphasizes the need for stronger data foundations, continuing recovery operations, clearer institutional responsibilities, and a comprehensive policy framework extending beyond law enforcement alone [1].

Baseline creation should include ordinary military firearms, captured Russian weapons, ammunition, grenades, launchers, mines, explosive components, and sensitive portable systems. It should also include photographs of markings, reports of battlefield abandonment, records of destruction, and documentation of weapons surrendered by civilians. The purpose is not simply to count objects. It is to preserve enough history that a weapon recovered later can be connected to a previous location, institution, unit, shipment, or loss event.

The treatment of captured and trophy weapons will be especially important. Ambiguous ownership is a precursor to disappearance. A weapon cannot remain indefinitely suspended between enemy property, Ukrainian military property, evidence, and personal possession. Captured matériel should either enter an official inventory, be surrendered for examination and disposal, or be declared under a clearly defined legal procedure. Informal tolerance may appear harmless while combatants remain attached to active units, but it creates an untraceable private stock once those units dissolve.

The second requirement is a recovery system that ordinary people can use without exposing themselves to unnecessary danger. Civilians may possess weapons for many reasons. Some received arms during emergency defense. Some recovered them from abandoned positions. Some inherited them from deceased relatives. Some retain weapons because they fear renewed invasion or distrust the future. Others may not know whether surrender will lead to prosecution. A system that ignores these distinctions may encourage concealment rather than compliance.

A temporary declaration or amnesty period could help separate passive possessors from active traffickers. The precise legal design would require Ukrainian political and judicial decisions, but the governing principle should be clear. A person who voluntarily reports a previously undeclared weapon should face a different process from a person who transports weapons for profit after the recovery deadline. The state must create an accessible path back into legality before imposing stronger sanctions on continued concealment and sale.

Any amnesty would need limits. It should not erase evidence of homicide, war crimes, organized trafficking, or deliberate theft from military stocks. Nor should it permit anonymous circulation under the guise of surrender. Weapons should be photographed, made safe, recorded, and where possible traced. The aim is to bring hidden objects into institutional visibility without granting impunity for serious violence.

Collection must also be physically safe. Mines, grenades, rockets, detonators, and degraded ammunition cannot be handled like ordinary property. Members of the public should not be encouraged to carry unstable munitions into municipal offices or police stations. Specialized recovery teams, confidential reporting systems, public instructions, and explosive-ordnance capacity will be essential. The documented spread of grenades, launchers, mines, and ammunition across Ukraine makes this as much a public-safety problem as an organized-crime problem [1].

The third requirement is secure consolidation. A collection program merely moves the problem if recovered weapons are placed in poorly protected depots. Every storage site creates a concentration attractive to thieves, corrupt insiders, hostile intelligence services, and organized crime. Depots must therefore be audited, guarded, monitored, and subjected to repeated reconciliation between physical holdings and administrative records.

Surplus weapons should not remain indefinitely in administrative limbo. Some may be retained for legitimate defense reserves. Some may be transferred through lawful state channels. Others should be deactivated or destroyed under documented procedures. Destruction records must be sufficiently detailed to prevent an intact weapon from later being explained away as an item previously destroyed.

Ammunition requires a parallel strategy. Public debate often treats the firearm as the principal object and ammunition as a secondary concern. In practice, cartridges, grenades, mines, warheads, propellants, and explosive fillers may be easier to disperse and can remain dangerous even when their original delivery systems are unavailable. Unstable ammunition also creates risks of accidental explosions, fires, toxic exposure, and civilian injury. Recovery policy must address the entire weapons system rather than the serial-numbered firearm alone.

The fourth requirement is veteran-centered governance. Veterans should not be portrayed as a presumptive criminal class. Most will not traffic weapons, and stigmatizing them would undermine both justice and public safety. Veterans possess the knowledge necessary to identify abandoned sites, informal practices, battlefield caches, trophy-weapon pathways, and deficiencies in wartime recordkeeping. Their participation may determine whether recovery policy reflects battlefield reality or administrative assumptions.

The Small Arms Survey's Ukrainian expert network has specifically identified veteran engagement, legal reform, law-enforcement training, and preparation for emerging uncrewed-system risks as priorities [5, 6].

Veteran reintegration is also preventive arms control. Reliable pensions, medical care, employment, housing, recognition of service, and lawful opportunities to apply military expertise reduce the conditions under which hidden weapons become economic insurance. Social support cannot eliminate trafficking, but institutional abandonment can make recruitment by criminal or mercenary organizations more attractive to a vulnerable minority.

The same logic applies to specialized technical personnel. Drone operators, engineers, communications experts, mechanics, logisticians, and explosive-ordnance specialists will possess skills with substantial civilian value. Reconstruction, emergency management, infrastructure inspection, agriculture, manufacturing, cybersecurity, and civil protection can absorb much of this expertise. Creating lawful professional pathways is more effective than treating technical knowledge itself as suspicious.

The fifth requirement is integrated tracing. A weapon recovered in another country should be checked rapidly against Ukrainian military, police, customs, and loss records, as well as international databases. INTERPOL's iARMS system allows participating authorities to record weapons reported lost, stolen, trafficked, or smuggled, submit international trace requests, and search for patterns across jurisdictions. Its usefulness depends on the quality and timeliness of the records states supply [4].

Tracing must move in both directions. European authorities need information from Ukraine to determine the origins of recovered weapons. Ukrainian investigators need information from foreign seizures to identify vulnerable units, depots, geographical areas, brokers, and transport networks. A trace should not end with a statement that a weapon originated in Ukraine. It should help identify the moment and mechanism through which the weapon entered illicit circulation.

Forensic information should supplement administrative tracing. Ballistic evidence can connect a firearm to shootings in different countries. Ammunition markings can associate seemingly separate seizures. Explosive residues and component characteristics can reveal common sources. Drone hardware and electronic records can identify production or modification patterns. Financial and communications evidence can expose the human network surrounding the physical object.

The sixth requirement is intelligence-led border control. Borders cannot be sealed without obstructing trade, reconstruction, refugee return, and normal economic life. Nor will traffickers necessarily move large, recognizable shipments. Existing European firearms networks use

established criminal routes and may transport weapons in small quantities or alongside other contraband [2, 3].

The objective should be to identify patterns rather than inspect everything indiscriminately. Authorities need shared watchlists, suspicious-shipment indicators, serial-number data, information on missing military property, vehicle and company intelligence, and rapid communication among customs, police, border guards, military investigators, and prosecutors. A successful interception should trigger investigation of the broader network rather than conclude with confiscation of the immediate shipment.

The seventh requirement is financial investigation. Weapons markets are social and financial systems, not merely collections of contraband. Brokers require payment, transportation, corrupt protection, storage, and customers. Investigators should examine unexplained assets, criminal barter, transport companies, shell businesses, depot-related corruption, and relationships between firearms trafficking and drug markets. Europol describes organized-crime groups as adaptable and able to use existing routes and business structures across multiple forms of crime [2, 3].

The eighth requirement is legal compatibility across Europe. Differences in criminal definitions, evidentiary standards, penalties, deactivation rules, and data practices can fragment investigations. The European Commission's 2026 proposal for a firearms-trafficking directive seeks common definitions of firearms offenses, stronger cooperation, improved data use, and provisions addressing illicit production technologies such as three-dimensional printing [7].

Legal harmonization will not eliminate trafficking, but it can reduce opportunities for networks to exploit jurisdictional gaps. It can also clarify which agencies are responsible when an offense begins in Ukraine, passes through several states, and culminates in a seizure elsewhere in Europe.

International assistance should not focus exclusively on the weapons donated by Western governments. Donors have legitimate reasons to track sensitive equipment and prevent diversion of systems they supplied. Yet the documented illicit reservoir is broader and includes Russian, Soviet, Ukrainian, civilian, captured, abandoned, and commercially modified matériel. A control program concerned only with Western end-use monitoring would leave much of the practical danger outside its field of view [1].

The policy vocabulary also matters. Describing the entire reservoir as "stolen NATO weapons" would be empirically misleading and politically destructive. It could reinforce disinformation, stigmatize Ukraine, and weaken cooperation with the very communities whose participation is required. Conversely, denying the existence of substantial domestic proliferation because

widespread international trafficking has not yet been demonstrated would delay preparation until the problem becomes harder to control.

The correct position combines evidentiary restraint with structural foresight. Present claims should be limited to what has been documented. Future policy should account for what becomes plausible when military and social conditions change.

Three broad postwar outcomes can be distinguished.

In a managed-recovery outcome, Ukraine and its partners establish records before demobilization, clarify the status of captured weapons, create credible surrender procedures, integrate veterans into recovery efforts, secure depots, destroy unnecessary stocks, and connect Ukrainian records with European tracing systems. Diversion still occurs, but it remains fragmented, detectable, and difficult to reproduce.

In a chronic-leakage outcome, high-profile systems remain mostly controlled, but rifles, grenades, ammunition, explosives, and launchers move into criminal markets through repeated small transactions. No single shipment appears strategically decisive. Over time, however, brokers establish dependable relationships, routes become normalized, and conflict weapons remain available for decades. The experience of weapons retained after the Balkan conflicts demonstrates how long conflict-legacy stocks can continue feeding European criminal markets [2].

In a strategic-shock outcome, a small number of sensitive systems or specialized capabilities reach an actor capable of producing a politically transformative attack. The quantity diverted may be tiny, but the consequences may include changes in aviation security, critical-infrastructure protection, political travel, public confidence, and international relations. This is less likely than chronic low-level leakage, but it cannot be ignored merely because it involves few weapons.

The chronic-leakage outcome is the more plausible large-scale failure. It requires no dramatic collapse of Ukrainian institutions and no coordinated sale of entire arsenals. It requires only repeated leakage from a large reservoir, combined with existing criminal demand and insufficiently coordinated recovery. The resulting market could remain numerically modest while still increasing the lethality and coercive power of European organized crime.

The strategic-shock outcome is the more consequential failure. Arms-control systems must therefore be designed around both cumulative probability and exceptional consequence. Common weapons require broad recovery, while sensitive systems require intensive accounting, intelligence attention, and immediate international notification when discrepancies occur.

None of these futures is predetermined. Weapons do not organize their own markets. People create relationships around them. Sellers must find brokers. Brokers must locate transporters. Transporters must obtain protection. Buyers must trust suppliers. Money or contraband must move in return. Every stage creates an opportunity for prevention.

The most important object of policy is therefore not only the weapon but the emerging relationship between its holder and a market. Recovering a rifle after it has reached a foreign gang removes one object. Preventing the first trusted exchange between a depot insider and a criminal broker may obstruct hundreds of future transactions.

This is why timing has such disproportionate importance. Once illicit prices become widely known, routes become reliable, officials are corrupted, and brokers establish reputations, the market acquires continuity. Before that threshold, many weapons remain dormant, concealed, personally retained, or locally isolated. Early policy can keep isolated holdings from becoming organized supply.

The central conclusion is not that peace will inevitably release a flood of Ukrainian weapons. It is that the transition to peace will remove several constraints that presently limit their mobility. The danger lies in assuming that declining combat automatically means declining weapons risk.

War creates the reservoir through distribution, capture, abandonment, emergency mobilization, and institutional strain. Peace may mobilize the reservoir through demobilization, economic exchange, civilian movement, criminal access, and declining military demand. Governance must intervene between those two stages.

Europe’s strategic task is therefore to make weapons visible before military structures contract, recover them before criminal prices rise, trace them before institutional memory disappears, and disrupt brokerage before isolated possession becomes a market.

A stable peace will require more than the cessation of fire. It will require preventing the material residue of war from acquiring a second life in organized crime, terrorism, political coercion, and future armed conflict.

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